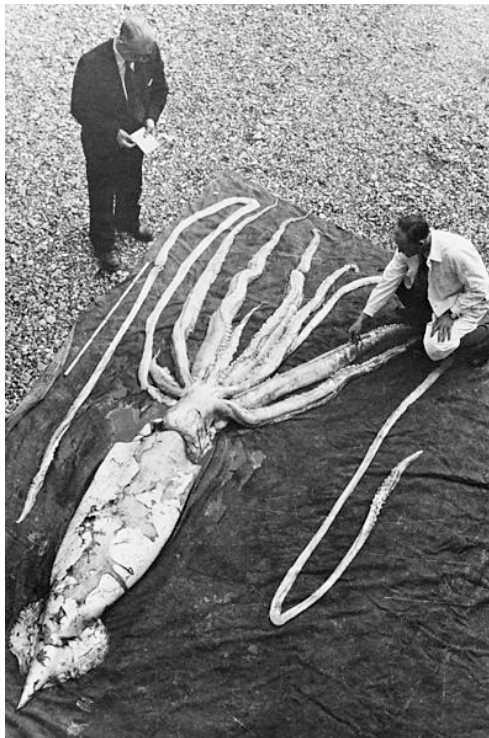


Consumer Culture and Post-Fordist Customization

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Modern societies are characterized by 'dialectic penury' (Baudrillard, 1998), insatiable needs and a constant sense of differentiation and competition and feeling of never having enough. Thus, Baudrillard attributed the underlying problem to ? social relationships and social logic, reflecting on? affluence of symbolic exchange, rather than condemning 'luxurious and spectacular penury'. According to his theory, the modern world represents a series of simulations, whereby nature is carefully managed, policed and tailored to the needs of humans, offering an abundance of signs with the false pretence of being real, i.e. in objects referred to as 'sham objects', that define our consumer society (Baudrillard, 1998).

This view is further supported by Kitsch, who contends that the development of society and mass production brought about the loss of originality and aesthetics of beauty and replaced these with simulations that reproduce and imitate, i.e. gadgets simulating functions without having real and practical



referents. The mass media in turn, plays a significant role in enhancing and generalizing the simulation process by the use of recombining of signs in their headlines and articles of celebrities and gossip columns.

Even relationships in modern society are seen as simulated and as imitating intimacy that isn't actually there, such as the relationship between advertisers and potential customers in a generalized game of human relations (Baudrillard, 1998). They put on a false pretence that they care about their customers, but in fact, their main concern and goal is to increase sales and profits. Everything is about symbolic exchange and consumption. The aim of capitalist societies is to produce excess, 'la part maudite' (Bataille, 1988), which in turn is used for excess production of goods for surplus, in the forms of games, art and conspicuous consumption for full economic growths without end (Featherstone, 1991).

Modern consumer society's main focus is the accumulation of material objects and consumer goods, premised upon the expansion of capitalist commodity production

and its increasing capacity for ideological manipulation from alternative social relations (Featherstone, 1991) to benefit capitalism. Additionally, business success is judged by GDP affected by its profits, further reinforcing the idea of commodity fetishism, referring to this as 'Selfish Capitalism' (James, 2007), as well as the privatization of public utilities, such as gas, water and electricity to benefit the rich.

Additionally, capitalism endorses the pleasures of excess by utilizing images and sites of consumption that blur the distinctions between art and everyday life with the mass production of art, these become part of everyday life products, i.e. put on clothes and integrated as mass rather than 'high' cultural products. In this condition of life, new middle classes are the intermediaries of culture, spreading ever-renewable lifestyles, with no rules but plenty of choices to the wider population (Shusterman, 1988).

We are constantly bombarded with adverts on TV, train stations, buses and social media to encourage us to 'shop until we drop' and especially for new middle classes, consumerism is considered to be a leisure activity more than a necessity done out of indulgence and pleasure, as opposed to serving basic human needs (Jones, et al., 2005). Due to the increasing consumption patterns and mass production, competitive branding becomes a necessity in a pool of endless choices for consumption, characterized by uniformed mass production, the



manufacturing of sameness and the importance of image-based differences along with products to produce distinguishable goods (Klein, 2000).

However, the development of post-Fordism gave rise to flexible specialisation and subcontracting (Kumar, 2005), whereby big corporations are increasingly subcontracting smaller niche businesses to produce specialised parts, i.e. Apple and Nike get all of their products' parts from different businesses around the world; that use their expertise to produce components for them. Thus, post-Fordism can be said to encourage and favour small businesses that can be seen in the popularity of crafts, tattoo parlours and artisan bakeries, however, Fordism is still present, evident in the exploitation of small businesses to an extent, i.e. the standardization of scripts, such as McDonald's Fordist production, whereby workers are prompted on what to do.

Furthermore, post-Fordist theory implies changes in consumption in that consumers want increasing volumes and quantities of products and these to be more customized to their own needs and identities as opposed to uniformed goods. It encourages large firms to want to collaborate with niche businesses in order to create more specialised and diverse products for consumers with the proposal for de-massification of production process and subcontracting, i.e. AirBnBs contract business owners under their branch.

However, modern capitalism is characterized by profit-making and competition, even volunteering is somewhat for profits, in that charities compete for donations and commodity fetishism is reinforced by increasing commercialization of education, i.e. universities are profit-making institutions who compete with one another for money.

The implications of these is a move away from

manual jobs towards professional, white-collar occupations in a 'knowledge society', in which knowledgeability and expertise are increasing, thus the need for these workers

are correspondingly increasing as well. This results in the traditional working-class to become middle-class with middle-class desires and consumer patterns, seen as an expression of identity. Work becomes a secondary point of referent in identity construction in modern post-Fordism (Ransome, 2005) due to the extensive varieties of occupational groups and types, these cannot be categorized as strictly in contemporary societies, i.e. people working from home; corporate office jobs; or internet influencers. This shows a level of deregulation and phasing out of Fordist production, manifesting in the flexibility of these employment patterns and cut-throat competition for recognition in the workplace, as well as in expressing one's self-identity to be different.

Theoretical arguments around the growing importance of consumerism for identity have

proposed ideas of society's acceptance of aesthetic life as morally good, whereby the self and life itself are open to be shaped and reconstructed aesthetically, with no solid concepts of human nature or true self (Featherstone, 1991). People's senses of themselves develop out of the activities they habitually engage in (Ransome, 2005), thus in the realm of consumption, manifested in

consumer choices and regarded as fluid so individuals are able to construct and deconstruct these as they please. Identity to be sharply defined has vanished with no solid grounds to construct upon, creating anxiety prone conditions without guidance or support. Greater choice in



post-Fordism in work, i.e. working from home and individual freedom of self-identity construction represents flexibility but greater insecurity.

Thus, the liquidity of the modern world creates uncertain and transient social, cultural and sexual identities, whereby individuals wear identities 'like a light cloak ready to be taken off' (Bauman, 2004: 30), i.e. becoming a citizen of a country other than the nationality one's born with or homemaker mothers going back into their careers. Douglas and Isherwood argue that consumerist modern societies make meaning through the use of material goods, in which consumption is a key ritual process, whereby people lay claim of possession of the meaning of objects beyond simple ownership (Bauman, 2004).

This means that the personalisation of objects enabled by post-Fordism provide the basis of the establishment of self-identity (McCracken,

1988), with the aim of being different and avoiding uniformity by partaking in constant consumerism and consumption to constantly innovate oneself, in a vicious cycle where everyone is trying to be different by conforming and becoming 'cultural dopes'. Furthermore, items of clothing communicate distinct social identities beyond material objects and as a way of people expressing their membership to particular social groups (Lury, 1996).

Thus, consumerism is evidently of growing significance for identity, demonstrated in the way social media is used by young people. They use social media platforms to present an image of themselves that they want to reveal to other people, manipulating and constructing these based on their own desires as to how they want others to see them. This conforms to Goffman's (1959)

performativity theory, in which he proposes that individuals when they are interacting with one another, attempt to create an image of themselves. In this, interaction is considered as a performance between actor and audience (Goffman, 1959), where individuals are able to influence the way in which they present themselves and put on a performance of who they see as desirable and acceptable, depending on the special setting they are in. The same applies to social media where they are able to construct and articulate their sense of identity.

However, the implications of the importance of consumerism for identity is that this new liquid modern way of life creates troublesome

identities, representing incarnations of ambivalence which is why they are at the centre of individuals' attention (Bauman, 2004). The inner truth of the self is materialised, leading to the idealization of objectified materials and consumer choices, in that individuals are able to pick and choose their identities by portraying themselves in different lights on various social media platforms (Bauman, 2007). Furthermore, the consequences of consumerism and its use for



identity construction is that people are never satisfied, there are always things that they want to buy because of enticing adverts or feelings of constantly innovating and changing oneself and appearances or lifestyles, so there is no end-

point of happiness or satisfaction in this condition.

There is an increase in plastic surgeries for example, showcasing this superficial way of life, constantly wanting to be more beautiful and aesthetically pleasing. Consumer choices are not representations of individual agency or freedom but rather the commodities themselves, leaving people without false autonomy and inauthenticity (James, 2007). This demonstrates greater social control and corporate colonisation, provoking self-obsession.

Concluding, consumer society and post-Fordist customization of products means that people are able to express their self-identity in more varied ways and have more disposable

incomes to do so. However, these embody the choices of commodity fetishism and capitalist profit-making businesses asserting their social control, creating an illusion of these being the rational choices of consumers, thus creating a false sense of identity through consumerism.

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